

# "God's Love Story Sermon Outlines"

by Doug Hamilton

## Section 23: Coming Home to God's Love Story (Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai and Zechariah)

In 606 BC, Babylon began the first of three deportations of the Jews from Jerusalem. By 586 BC, they destroyed Jerusalem and carried away the remaining captives 900 miles to Babylon. The chosen people of God strayed from the truth and the result was destruction of the motherland. The walls were breached, the Babylonian troops poured in, countless thousands were murdered, hundreds of thousands were marched off and the holy temple was completely destroyed. As they were being led away from their smoldering city and Temple there was but one thought... "Will we ever return?"

They were at risk of losing all hope in the promises of God. Israel's struggle to someday make it back to the motherland would be a tough path, winding through heartache, persecution and sorrow. I am persuaded by examining their path through the eyes of some of the prophets and accounts from the OT, we could actually see a pattern for us today. This was about bringing the Israelites home from captivity.

### The Proclamation of the Prophets

Many of the prophets of the Old Testament, after warning and condemning the nation for the waywardness, spent a good portion of time proclaiming the hope of return for the disheartened Israelites. One of these prophets named Jeremiah prophesied with great accuracy of their coming captivity and of their return years later.

- *Jeremiah 25:12 'Then it will be when seventy years are completed I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation,' declares the LORD, 'for their iniquity, and the land of the Chaldeans; and I will make it an everlasting desolation.*
- *Jeremiah 29:10-11 "For thus says the LORD, 'When seventy years have been completed for Babylon, I will visit you and fulfill My good word to you, to bring you back to this place. <sup>11</sup> 'For I know the plans that I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope.'*

### Jeremiah's prediction comes true.

This prophecy came into focus in 539 BC, for Cyrus and the Persians conquered Babylon. This is where the Book of Ezra begins.

Ezra 1:1-2 Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also *put it* in writing, saying: <sup>2</sup>"Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, 'The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah.'"

**538 BC:** Cyrus moved quickly to initiate a policy of tolerance toward the captive Jews in the land. He issued an edict allowing some of them to return back home. 42,360 dedicated Jews made the four month, 900 mile trip back to Jerusalem (Ezr 2:64). Sheshbazzar (Ezr 1:8) was the

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officially appointed leader, and Zerubbabel his nephew (Ezr 3:2), who was probably the one to whom the Jews looked as leader.

## 1. The Altar of Sacrifice Rebuilt.

**537 BC:** There was an altar built at the site of the original Temple (Ezra 3:6) and *“they began to offer burnt offerings to the LORD, but the foundation of the temple of the LORD had not been laid.”* There had not been a sacrifice to God offered in Jerusalem for seven decades, but now it was changing. It was not an impressive or sizable altar, but it was a start. If the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step, then the return of a people to God begins with a first sacrifice.



## 2) The Foundation was laid.

**March 537 BC:** Work had begun to start rebuilding the Temple (Ezra 3:8). They laid the foundation for the Temple (3:10) and many sang praises to the Lord out of great joy (3:11). They completed it in **536 BC**, just as Jeremiah predicted concerning the 70 years, from 606 to 536 BC. At the time of completion of the foundation, the younger workers cheered and praised, but *“the old men who had seen the first temple, wept with a loud voice when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes”* (3:12). There was great sadness because they viewed the humble foundation on the backdrop the glorious Temple which Solomon built and they had seen with their own eyes. They knew this temple would not be coming back to the glory of the original one. The size and quality of the foundation determines the future structure that will be built. The old timers simply could not imagine this structure to be impressive in the slightest.

## 3) Obstacles Arise.

In chapter four the builders meet resistance from the local Samaritans. These adversarial locals were not happy that the Jews were back in the homeland and decided to become a thorn in their flesh. They *“discouraged the people of Judah, and frightened them from building, <sup>5</sup> and hired counselors against them to frustrate their counsel all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia.”* (4:4-5). They wrote a letter of false accusation to the Persian King Artaxerxes, saying they are rebuilding with the intention of rebellion. When the king heard about it, a decision was made. 4:24 *“work on the house of God in Jerusalem ceased, and it was stopped until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.”* It would remain this way until after King Artaxerxes went to the grave. For sixteen years they were discouraged by the Samaritans to not continue construction of the second temple, choosing to work on their own homes instead. The prophet Haggai addressed this attitude in 1:4 *“Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses while this house lies desolate?”*

## 4) Obstacles Overcome.

**521 BC:** There was a new king on the throne named Darius. He offered a wave of change, expectation and enthusiasm swept over the Jewish communities. Along with that God sent two men to preach motivating lessons to the people to again startup the work.

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Ezra 5:1-2 *“The prophets, Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel, who was over them, <sup>2</sup> then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak arose and began to rebuild the house of God which is in Jerusalem; and the prophets of God were with them supporting them.”*

## In 520 BC:

- 1) The word of the LORD came to Zechariah (Zech 1:7). He began to proclaim a message of direction, hope and encouragement concerning the rebuilding of the temple.
- 2) The prophet Haggai began to do the same. Haggai 1:5-7 *Now therefore, thus says the LORD of hosts, “Consider your ways!” <sup>6</sup> “You have sown much, but harvest little; you eat, but there is not enough to be satisfied; you drink, but there is not enough to become drunk; you put on clothing, but no one is warm enough; and he who earns, earns wages to put into a purse with holes.” <sup>7</sup> Thus says the LORD of hosts, “Consider your ways!*

The adversaries did not like that fact the Jews were once again motivated so they sent off a letter to King Darius. They were calling into question the Jews’ claim that Cyrus decreed the temple to be rebuilt years prior. King Darius checked the royal records and found it to be true and the rebuilding of the temple would continue.

## Temple complete

**Spring of 516 BC:** *Ezra 6:14 And the elders of the Jews were successful in building through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. And they finished building according to the command of the God of Israel and the decree of Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia.* Twenty years after coming into the land, they finally completed the Temple. They could finally carryout the full sacrifices which God commanded.

**458 BC:** Ezra arrives in Jerusalem. *Ezra 7:8 He came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king.* With the caravan was a great amount of treasure and supplies donated by King Artaxerxes for refurbishing the Temple. It had been nearly fifty years since the Temple structure was complete and it needed updating.

Not only was the Temple in disarray, but also the Jewish marriages (9:2). It has been estimated that more than 80% of the men married foreign women. Since the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world, the state of the next generation in Jerusalem was not going well. For the 13 years Ezra was the sole standout spiritual leader in Jerusalem, directing the cleanup effort for the Temple and their marriages.

## Nehemiah comes to Jerusalem.

**Winter 445 BC:** A Jewish cupbearer to King Artaxerxes named Nehemiah received a report from Jerusalem that things were not going well. Yes they have the temple rebuilt, but there is no wall of protection around the city. He poured his heart out to God (Chapter 1), but was still very saddened. One day while serving wine, the king noticed this sadness, inquired and was informed of what was on Nehemiah’s heart. He requested permission of the king to visit his motherland and inspect it himself (Chapter 2). By the end of the chapter Nehemiah personally inspects the

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dilapidated condition of the walls. All that was left were partial walls from the Babylonian invasion from 141 year prior. He makes it his personal goal to have it rebuilt.

### Nehemiah also met resistance from the natives.

He patriotically rallied the Jews to start the wall building project. It was not long before the local yokels were bothering them and attempting to foil the task.



- When the adversaries said “*What is this thing you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?*”(2:19). Nehemiah told them to mind their own business and they kept on building the walls.
- The adversaries mocked against their handiwork, “*...if a fox should jump on it, he would break their stone wall down!*” (4:3). Nehemiah surrendered their complaints to God, ignored them kept on working.
- The adversaries plotted to kill them (4:7-8). Nehemiah posted guards for protection and kept on building the walls.
- When the adversaries plotted to use sneak attacks (4:12), Nehemiah expanded the guard and they kept on building.
- *Nehemiah 6:15-16 So the wall was completed...in fifty-two days. <sup>16</sup> When all our enemies heard of it, and all the nations surrounding us saw it, they lost their confidence; for they recognized that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God.”*

No matter what the enemy threw at Nehemiah and the wall builders, it would not distract them, for “*They had a mind to work!*” (4:6). Just like there was a material foundation laid for the Temple decades before, there was now a unity at the foundation of the people of God as demonstrated in the writings of Nehemiah.

- Chapter 8: Ezra rededicated the Law by publically reading it to the people (8:1-8). They proclaim the day “Holy” (8:9-12) and restore the Feast of Booths (8:13-18).
- Chapter 9: The people have a public confession of their sins.
- Chapter 10: They signed a pledge of covenant before each other and God.
- Chapter 11: The primary leaders were stationed in Jerusalem and others disperse out from the city to the other towns.
- Chapter 12: There was a formal dedication of the wall and Temple procedures.
- Chapter 13: The foreigners put out, the Temple cleansed, Tithes and Sabbath restored and mixed marriages were forbidden.

### What do we learn from this?

There are many in the kingdom of God who have tasted salvation, but walked away in their lack of commitment. They believed for a while, but in time of temptation have fallen away (Luke

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8:13). They have strayed from the truth (James 5:19) and have forgotten the love story of God. Don't lose heart! Learn from Israel and Come Home to God's Love Story!

### Build that altar of sacrifice today!

When returning back to the Promised Land, we must build an altar of sacrifice to God. It might have been quite some time since you lived a sacrificial life unto God, but you can start today.

### Build that sure foundation today!

Ephesians 2:19-22 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, <sup>20</sup> having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner *stone*. <sup>21</sup> in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, <sup>22</sup> in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.

### Deal with the obstacles today!

There are so many distractions vying for attention from the task at hand. The world does not want you to escape judgment, but to stay in the same boat as them; the devil certainly does not want you to be reacquainted with God's Love Story. Whatever comes your way, deal with it. Have a mind to work for the Lord!

Rededicate your life to Christ, come home! Start living a sacrificial life for God, shore up that foundation and deal with the obstacles that are coming your way. Encourage others to do the same. Don't put it off any longer! In closing, meditate on the words of "*Softly and Tenderly*".

Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling, calling for you and for me;  
see on the portals he's waiting and watching, watching for you and for me.

Why should we tarry when Jesus is pleading, pleading for you and for me?  
Why should we linger and heed not his mercies, mercies for you and for me?

Time is now fleeting, the moments are passing, passing from you and from me;  
shadows are gathering, deathbeds are coming, coming for you and for me.

O for the wonderful love he has promised, promised for you and for me!  
Though we have sinned, he has mercy and pardon, pardon for you and for me.

Come home, come home; ye who are weary come home;  
earnestly, tenderly, Jesus is calling, calling, O sinner, come home!

God's Love Story is About Coming Home!